

What Happened to the Route 24 Deer?

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Arthur Roy Melvin was born in 1912 in Wing, Illinois. He was the son of Arthur Clyde Melvin and Mae Janette Cottrell. Roy attended and graduated from Chatsworth High School. He then graduated from Illinois State Normal University.

As a boy in the 1930s, Roy adopted the hobby of being a ham radio operator. He was one of the first ham radio operators in the Fairbury area.

Roy Melvin married Mabel Clarice Jarvis in 1936 in Forrest. Roy then taught mathematics at Sheridan High School, about 65 miles north of Fairbury. During World War II, Roy worked for the Chicago Bridge and Iron Company.

Henry Streib was a sixth-grade elementary teacher in Fairbury. In June of 1928, he converted the vacant lot just west of his gas and oil station into a tourist park. Henry also erected two small cottages for tourist rental.

Harry P. Klopfenstein was born in 1903 in Gridley, Illinois. Harry became a leading Fairbury businessman. He operated the Klopfenstein Motor Company for 22 years in Fairbury. Harry was also the Mayor of Fairbury from 1942-1946.

The Streib gas station was sold a couple of times. At some point, Harry Klopfenstein purchased the site on the west edge of Fairbury on Route 24. This site included a Standard Oil gas station and a hotel consisting of several stand-alone cabins.

In April of 1946, Roy Melvin leased the gas station and cabins from Harry Klopfenstein. Mr. Melvin then moved his family from Sheridan to Fairbury. Roy began to operate the gas station and the hotel. Modifications were made to connect the stand-alone cabins into a continuous building. A small restaurant was also established next to the gas station.

After operating the gas station and hotel for three years, Roy Melvin purchased the gas station and hotel from Harry Klopfenstein in 1949. The hotel was commonly called "Melvin's Hotel." In 1951, Roy started to lease the restaurant to Mrs. Ben Sutter. She had been working at this restaurant for four years as the evening cook. Roy and his wife continued to operate the service station and hotel.

Roy moved his ham radio set-up to the lobby of the hotel. The hotel customers enjoyed hearing stories about the people that Roy communicated with by ham radio in faraway places.

In 1953, Roy Melvin started to lease the gas station to the Soon-Vacuum Oil Company. The building that housed the station and the cafe had a complete exterior face-lift. A new

concrete service apron and stone driveway were installed. A new lighting system was also installed.

In August of 1953, the Fairbury-Cropsey school system hired two new math teachers. These new teachers were Roy Melvin and Roberta Herzog. They both began teaching at Fairbury in the Fall of 1953.

Postcards to advertise the hotel were printed and distributed. One of these postcards noted that Melvin's Hotel was in Central Illinois on U.S. Highway 24. This hotel had 15 clean and modern units with baths, a hot water heating system, and innerspring mattresses. Adjacent to the hotel was a restaurant and gas station. The hotel was a member of the United Motor Courts National Credit Card Incorporation. The traveler noted that he spent \$8.00 for a night's stay at the hotel on this particular postcard.

In 1964, Merlin "Shorty" Harris and his wife purchased the Melvin Hotel from Roy Melvin and his wife. Mr. Harris was from Colfax, and he lived both in Colfax and Fairbury during his lifetime. The name was changed from Melvin's Hotel to the Indian Trail Motel. Mr. and Mrs. Harris began to manage the hotel and restaurant.

In 1968, Mr. Harris leased the Pure truck stop at Towanda, Illinois. They continued to operate the Indian Trail Motel in Fairbury. They then added a Paxton restaurant to their business holdings.

In 1966, Mr. Harris traveled to Wisconsin and purchased a large fiberglass deer. This deer was 18 feet long and 15 feet high. Mr. Harris first installed this deer at his Towanda restaurant. A bib was added to the deer since it was advertising the Towanda restaurant. In 1970, Mr. Harris moved the large deer from his Towanda restaurant to the Indian Trail Motel on Route 24 in Fairbury. The deer continued to wear his bib while he was on display in Fairbury.

In 1990, Mrs. Harris died. Mr. Harris continued to operate the Indian Trails Motel. In 1992, Merlin Harris decided to sell the hotel and associated land to the McDonald's Corporation. A new McDonald's fast-food restaurant was erected on this site.

The deer was sold to Carl Kieser. He transported the giant deer to his Gibson City Fishing and Camping Club. This site is two miles south of Gibson City and a half-mile east of U.S. Route 47.

In 2007, Mr. Kieser created a company named Aquatic Control of Illinois. He advertised and sold a product called Pond Clear Plus. This product was advertised to control lake weeds and algae "Mother Nature's Way," with "No Chemicals." It proclaimed that a biological method with live bacteria was used to dissolve plant nutrients, black muck, and rotten egg odor. This product was very successful, and Mr. Kieser sold over \$400,000 worth of this product.

Mr. Kieser then ran into serious problems with the law. The first issue he had was a failure to pay any income taxes on the product's sales. The second issue he had was the product contained Diuron 80DF. The warning label for this product stated the product should not be applied directly to water due to its toxicity to fish and other aquatic wildlife. Carl Kieser is currently incarcerated at the Cumberland, Maryland, federal prison with an estimated release date of April of 2021. The deer is still in good condition and is located at the Gibson City Fishing and Camping Club.

This giant deer was a Fairbury landmark from 1970 until 1992. Many Fairbury residents fondly remember the "deer with a bib" who invited visitors to spend the night at the Indian Trail Motel.



Mervin "Shorty" Harris standing in front of the Indian Trails Motel with the landmark deer with a bib in 1992



Fairbury deer at the Gibson City fishing camp in August of 2019.